

Cubs, WLS-Ch. 7 closing in on deal to air 25 games next season

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Body

Dec. 12--In a surprise move, the Cubs are about to strike a deal with WLS-Ch.7 to broadcast a portion of the team's schedule through 2019.

The ABC-owned station is expected to carry 25 games per season beginning in April. The station would air games in primetime, daytime and weekends. The deal is expected to be finalized within days, according to sources.

The Cubs opted out of an agreement with Tribune Media's WGN-Ch. 9 last year, freeing up about 70 games on television next season and ostensibly pulling the plug on a relationship that dates to 1948. The move enabled the Cubs to sync up expiring broadcast and cable rights after the 2019 season, when the team will look to launch its regional sports network.

The Cubs earned about \$60 million splitting their schedule between CSN Chicago and WGN-TV. The team received about \$500,000 per game from CSN and about \$250,000 per game from WGN, according to sources. But years of dismal play resulted in low ratings and poor ad sales for WGN-TV, which sources say lost about \$200,000 per game last season. In recent negotiations this fall, Tribune Media balked at paying its previous rate, much less an increase sought by the Cubs, according to sources.

The potential deal with a network-owned station is something of a media curveball, with few industry observers pegging WLS-TV as a player in the Cubs' drawn-out drama to find a new TV partner. Where the balance of next season's television schedule ends up remains to be seen, but sources say WGN or CSN may pick up the remaining displaced games.

The team has been exploring moving some portion of the TV schedule over to CSN, in which the Cubs have a stake, according to sources.

Once completed, it would be the first time Cubs games have aired on WLS-Ch.7, and the timing may prove fortuitous for the station, with signings of ace Jon Lester and coveted manager Joe Maddon.

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